

**(BORN MARIA VIOLETTA SZWARC)
ON HER STAY IN ESTORIL IN 1940**

Family group:

Aleksander (Olek) Szwarc (01.12.1899 - 17. 09. 1988)

Sonia (Sophie) Brzezinska Szwarc (06.07.1907 - 12.12.1995)

George Suart, born Jerzy Szwarc (25.01.1931- 29 2018.12.2018)

Mary V. Seeman, born Maria Violetta Szwarc (24.03.1935 -)

Stayed at:

Pensão Londres (Estoril), August 18 to October 5, 1940

Mary Seeman was born Maria Violetta (Violusia) Szwarc, in Lodz, Poland, on March 24, 1935, into a secular Jewish family. Her mother, Sonia, was born in Lodz. Her father, Olek or Oles, was a chemical engineer working for the chemical firm *Kuhlman*, a company whose headquarters were in Paris. Olek's family had lived for generations in the Polish city of Zgierz, where his father, Issucher, served on the town council.



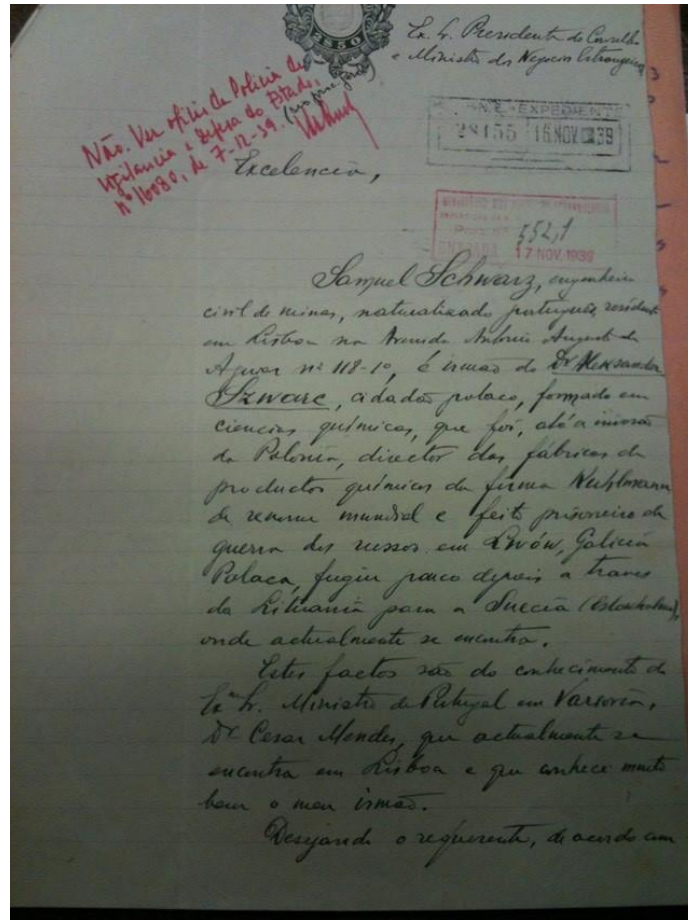
From left to right: Olek, Issucher and Sonia, with Mary in front of her grandfather.

Samuel, the oldest of Olek's nine siblings, had been living in Portugal since 1914, working as a mining engineer. By the 1920s he was well-known for having (re)discovered the *marranos*, Portuguese Jews who had covertly lived their religion ever since the days of the Inquisition. Another of Olek's brothers, sculptor Marek Szwarc, lived in Paris with his wife, Guina, and daughter Tereska.

Olek, who has served in the Polish army in World War I, lived with his wife and two children, Jerzy and Maria Violetta (Violusia), in Lodz. In September 1939, as soon as the Germans attacked, he was conscripted into the Polish army. Captured by the Russian army in Eastern Poland, he managed to escape and make his way to Sweden. From there, he went to France on his French work visa, and joined his brother, Marek, and, with some difficulty, was finally successful in obtaining a French entry visa for his wife and children.

In Lodz, occupied by the German army, a German officer was billeted in Sonia's apartment. Mary has memories of the officer, whose presence meant relative safety. One night in December 1940, the family was awakened by Polish neighbors who demanded that Sonia and the children leave the apartment because they were Jews. The officer, in full German uniform, came to the door and chased them away. On another occasion, Mary remembers the officer bringing roast chicken home for the family. Mary also remembers wearing a patch bearing the Star of David, in yellow, on her clothes.

In Lisbon, Olek's brother, Samuel, wrote to Salazar asking for an entry visa to Portugal for his brother's family. In 1938, in exchange for Portuguese citizenship, Samuel had donated to the Portuguese state an old synagogue in Tomar, which he had purchased. It was to become the Luso-Hebrew Museum. Salazar's response to Samuel's request was negative.



Page of the request by Samuel Schwarz to Salazar on behalf of his brother.

Top left is the indication that the request has been refused. (Courtesy of Mary Seeman)

In January 1940, Sonia, her parents, and her children left by bus to Warsaw to collect their French visas. In the lining of Mary's coat, her grandmother had sewn the family's jewelry. Mary, 4 years old at the time, remembers that bus ride because, standing inside the bus, she wet her pants. In Warsaw they stayed with friends, in a house where one of the walls of the bathroom was missing as a result of bombings. Mary remembers the train station in Warsaw where the family waited for a train to take them to the border town of Katowice. It was there that the restaurant would not serve them because they were Jews, and where someone stole her dolly's purse.

It was also there, when the train to Katowice finally arrived, that the crowd on the platform surged forward, trampling 4-year-old Mary underfoot. Her grandfather

rescued her and pushed her, his daughter Sonia, his wife, and Jerzy through the open windows of the train. He himself, too large for the window, bribed a conductor to let him through the door. Many others were left behind.

In Katowice, the whole family stayed in one room. Meals were taken in a soup kitchen. Grandfather slept on the couch, the four others shared a double bed. **'Every night I wet the bed and woke the others up'**. Jerzy, then 9 years old, collected the silver paper from discarded cigarette packs on the street and tried to sell them. Mary's maternal grandparents, who did not have a visa for France, were fortunate to receive an entry visa to Italy from the Italian consulate, again through the use of bribery. The jewelry sewn into the lining of Mary's coat proved useful. The family were then able to leave Poland on the strength of their visas, and took the train to Trieste, Italy. Along this route, Mary remembers an itchy head from lice. From Trieste, Mary's maternal grandparents were able to gain passage on a ship to Palestine. (This was before the British blocked all entry). Olek met the train in Trieste, reunited with his wife and children after nine months of separation. By this time, Mary had turned five.

In May 1940, the Szwarc were in Paris with Guina and Tereska Szwarc. Marek had joined the Polish army in exile and by then was in Scotland. Guina's parents and their close relatives, who had arrived from Poland and Belgium, were also in Paris with them. On May 10, fleeing the German invasion, the group of eleven people headed south in two cars. At one point, one of the cars broke down and they all piled into the other car, hanging the luggage from the window. The three families settled near the French border with Spain, in Arcachon and St. Jean de Luz. In Bayonne, the Portuguese vice-consul, Manuel Vieira Braga, under instruction from Portuguese consul Aristides de Sousa Mendes, signed their 3-month transit visas to Portugal, which allowed them to leave France some time between 20 and 25 June.

'A happy interlude'

A few days after obtaining the Sousa Mendes visa, the family entered Portugal. Tereska, Guina, and Guina's family were sent by the PVDE to Figueira da Foz, as happened to many Sousa Mendes visa recipients. From there, Tereska and her mother left for

England as soon as they could, hoping to join Marek. Some of Guina's family also went to England.

Mary's family stayed with Samuel in Lisbon, hoping to obtain entry visas to the United States. After three months, their transit visa was renewed and, in August, they moved to Monte Estoril, staying for the summer at the *Pensão Londres*. The photographs, presumably taken by Samuel, show the Szwarcz with Samuel's daughter, Clara, and wife, Agatha, in the gardens of Casino do Estoril.



The Szwarc and the Schwarz families in the Estoril Casino Gardens (Summer, 1940). Left to right: Sonia and Olek Szwarcz, Agatha Schwarz, her daughter Clara, and the two children, Mary and George. (Courtesy of Mary Seeman and João Schwarz da Silva)

On October 5, 1940, with the beginning of school, the family settled in Lisbon, in a large room, Mary remembers, address unknown. Jerzy stayed in Carcavelos, as a boarding student at St. Julian's School. Mary went to one of the French schools in Lisbon, possibly the *Collège Féminin Français*, at Rua do Salitre.

'I was shy, I didn't talk to the other kids'.

Mary shared her desk with an older girl, also a foreigner. She wrote her numbers on a slate and wore a pinafore. She was just starting to learn to read. At the end of class, she remembers the joy of running down a steep hill to meet her mother arriving to pick her up. Of Lisbon, she recalls her parents attending coffee houses (they weren't allowed to work). There was a social life, friends (other refugees) visited their one room at home. She remembers a Mr. Grossinger. She does not remember the wedding of her cousin Clara, Samuel's daughter, to Artur Augusto Silva. Clara, however, told everyone that **'My little cousin cried throughout the entire wedding'**.



An advertisement for *Pensão Londres* in the 1930s. The *Pensão* is in business today as *Casa Londres*.

Mary Seeman remembers hearing the names 'Joint' and 'Hias', indicating that the family was receiving support - financial, and / or logistical - from these American Jewish refugee support institutions. Their transit visa was renewed a second time.

Olek wanted to go to the United States where he had a distant cousin, Alfred Santell, a movie director in California. However, the American visa proved difficult to obtain. Aware of an immigration program to Canada aimed at Polish engineers, Olek applied. In April 1941, the family boarded the *Guiné* for New York, from where they went to

Montreal. There they settled, and Mary entered pre-school. **'For two months, I refused to speak English'.**



The Portuguese ship *Guiné* during the Second World War.

'Samuel always took care of the whole family, paying all the sisters' dowries when they married, and the brothers' university fees. During the War, he kept sending food packages to the ghettos.'

Issucher Szwarc, Olek and Samuel's father, died in Zgierz. He had assembled an extensive library of works on Jewish history and culture. When a German soldier entered his home in December, 1939, threatening to destroy his library, Issucher, age 80, collapsed and died. He was the last person to be buried in the Jewish cemetery in Zgierz.

Only two of Olek's siblings were living in Poland when War broke out, Henryk and Zosia. Three had died early. Other than Samuel and Marek, the remaining sibs lived in Palestine. Zosia and her son, Rysio, died in the Warsaw ghetto., Henryk, his wife Mala, and sons David and Wladek, were first in the Lodz Ghetto, and were then transferred, in October 1940, to the Warsaw Ghetto. There, they received coffee bags and canned

sardines from Samuel, sent from Lisbon. A Polish friend of Peruvian nationality managed to hide David outside the ghetto. In January 1943, Wladek was deported to Treblinka, where he probably was shot on arrival. In the same year, Henryk and Mala were deported to Majdanek, where they met their death.

Today, Mary Seeman lives in Toronto with her family. From her stay in Portugal, Mary Seeman remembers a moment of respite in an exodus that would last more than a year.

'We knew we had escaped the worst'.



Mary Seeman, her husband Phil, their three sons, their wives and four of her six grandchildren in a photograph from 2010.